



**University of  
Zurich**<sup>UZH</sup>

**Zurich Open Repository and  
Archive**

University of Zurich  
University Library  
Strickhofstrasse 39  
CH-8057 Zurich  
[www.zora.uzh.ch](http://www.zora.uzh.ch)

---

Year: 2018

---

## Writing and the book

Rohrbach, Lena

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110431360-038>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-159927>

Book Section

Published Version

Originally published at:

Rohrbach, Lena (2018). Writing and the book. In: Glauser, Jürg; Hermann, Pernille; Mitchell, Stephen A.. Handbook of pre-modern Nordic memory studies : interdisciplinary approaches Part II: Case studies. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 399-405.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110431360-038>

Lena Rohrbach

## **II: 2 Writing and the Book**

### **1 Introduction**

The institution of cultural memory, as opposed to communicative memory, has been inextricably linked in memory theory with the cultural technique of writing. Jan Assmann emphasizes that cultural memory is dependent on external objects that serve as carriers of memory and “may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another” (Assmann 2010, 111; see also Hermann 2013, 334). One such mobile external carrier is the book, which quickly developed into the standard carrier for written texts after it came into use in late Antiquity. The antique and medieval codex consisted of gatherings of varying material (initially wax tablets and papyrus, in the Middle Ages predominantly parchment, towards the end of the medieval period also paper) that were compiled and bound together (Jakobi-Mirwald 2004, 113–120). The material qualities of the codex made it easier to retrieve and refer to passages than on a scroll and allowed for intricate arrangements of texts within the three-dimensional space of the book (on the three-dimensional quality of the book, see Rohrbach 2010, 120–121). Furthermore, the medium of the book allowed for comprehensive compilations of texts that a single scroll could not hold (Skeat 1994, 263–264).

In the pre-modern North, the medium of the book was introduced together with the advent of writing in the Latin alphabet in the wake of Christianity. The oldest Nordic manuscripts date from the twelfth century, and since then the number of books produced grew steadily throughout the Middle Ages. The majority of the medieval Nordic codices comprise more than one text. Pernille Hermann (2013, 347) described the pre-modern Norse textual corpus as a storehouse for knowledge and emphasized that the inherent interpretative quality of writing enabled a more complex engagement with the past than other external media of memory. From a more explicitly material perspective, the selection and arrangement of texts in a book might be approached as material manifestations of organization of this storehouse that allow insight into underlying conceptualisations of cultural memory.

## 2 Case study

One fruitful case for the study of the construction and conceptualisation of memory in the context of Old Norse studies concerns compilations of sagas that deal with the lives and miracles of the three Icelandic saint bishops: Jón Ögmundsson (1052–1121), Þorlákr Þorláksson (1133–1193) and Guðmundr Arason (1161–1237). These sagas are handed down in a limited group of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century manuscripts (all datings in this chapter according to [www.onp.ku.dk](http://www.onp.ku.dk)). Some of these manuscripts contain only one saga, some are only preserved in fragmentary form and thus do not allow insights into the compilation in which the sagas were placed originally. But in the majority of the manuscripts, the sagas are compiled together with a varying selection of texts. A comparative study of the arrangement of these texts in the manuscript tradition ought to allow insights into how the three saint bishops were remembered and conceptualised.

AM 219 fol. (c. 1370–1380) is one of two medieval manuscripts transmitting at least fragments of the sagas of all three Icelandic saints. The manuscript is today organised chronologically following the birth and death dates of the three bishops. It is impossible to tell whether this was indeed the original order, due to the fragmentary state of the manuscript. A comparison with four other manuscripts of *biskupasögur* [sagas of bishops] containing more than just one text leads to the conclusion that this order is not the most probable one. These manuscripts, AM 645 4to (c. 1220 and 1225–1250), AM 234 fol. (c. 1340), Holm perg 5 fol. (c. 1350–1365) and AM 657 c 4to (c. 1340–1390) are all compilations featuring sagas of saints of different kinds as well as other types of texts, and they are all characterized by the ahistorical arrangement of their material, at least when a linear understanding of history is applied.

**Table 1:** Contents of AM 645 4to (c. 1220 and 1225–1250)

Folios	Text	Historical period
1r–11v	Jarteinabók Þorláks biskups	1133–1193
11v–24v	Clemens saga	AD 50–97
25r–30r	Péturs saga postola	
30r–33r	Jakobs saga postola	
33r–35v	Bartholomeus saga postola	
35v–41r	Mattheus saga postola	
41r–43r	Andreas saga postola	
43r–51v	Niðrstigningar saga	
55v–66v	Martinus saga biskups	AD 316–397

AM 645 4to (table 1), the oldest of the four codices, comprises a text of the older collection of miracles of Saint Þorlákr (*Jarteinabók Þorláks biskups*), *Clemens saga*, which is a saga about the sainted Pope Clement I (AD 50–97), followed by a number of *postolasögur* [sagas of apostles], followed by *Niðrstigningar saga*, a translation from the gospel of Nicodemus that tells about Jesus' descent into hell, followed by *Martinus saga biskups* about St Martin of Tours, the prototype of all saint bishops, who lived during the fourth century. The manuscript consists of two codices: the last two texts and the end of *Andreas saga postola* are written in a different hand of a slightly younger date, and the text of *Andreas saga* overlaps in the two parts (<https://handrit.is/is/manuscript/view/en/AM04-0645>). Anne Holtmark (1938, 9) argued that both parts were written at the episcopal see of Skálholt. Irrespective of the separate origin of the two parts, AM 645 4to stages Þorlákr as the successor of St Martin, the apostles and Pope Clement (Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2002, c). The arrangement of the codex reveals that we are not dealing with a historical, but rather a typological, ahistorical construction of this succession.

**Table 2:** Contents of AM 234 fol. (c. 1340)

Folios	Text	Historical period	Feast days
1r–19v	Antóníus saga	d. AD 357	17 January
19v–28v	Páls saga postola		25 January
28v–55v	Maríu saga		2 February
55v–67r	Jóns saga helga A	1052–1121	3 March
67r–73r	Ágústínus saga	AD 354–430	28 August
74v–78v	Vitae patrum		
79r–81v	Thómas saga erkibiskups	1118–1170	29 December

A similar arrangement can be discerned in AM 234 fol. (table 2). The compilation in this manuscript begins with the saga about St Anton the hermit who died in AD 357 followed by sagas about the apostle Paul and holy Mary, followed by *Jóns saga helga*, which in turn is followed by *Ágústínus saga* and a fragment of the Old Norse translation of *Vitae patrum*. The codex ends with the saga of St Thomas Becket (1118–1170), thus reaching nearly contemporary times. According to marginalia in the manuscripts and to Árni Magnússon's notes, this codex used to be even more comprehensive and used to belong to the episcopal see at Skálholt (see <https://handrit.is/is/manuscript/view/en/AM02-0234>). Árni Magnússon received the manuscript in pieces and reassembled it. He had some doubts as to whether the last two texts originally formed the beginning of the codex, as the recto-page in front of *Vitae patrum* that forms the beginning of a quire, is blank.

But in both arrangements, the order of the texts in the codex jumps within history from the beginnings of Christianity to contemporary times and back and yet again forward in time. A chronological order was thus not at work in the making of this compilation. A closer study of the order of texts reveals that it follows the order of the Church year, an arrangement that is also present in AM 235 fol., a codex of *Heilagra manna sögur* [saints's sagas] that also includes (a fragment of) *Jóns saga helga* (see Foote 2003, ccxvi). The texts are compiled according to the feast days of the saints in the course of the year. The identification of this order supports Árni Magnússon's assumption that *Vitae patrum* used to form the beginning of the codex, as in this order *Thómas saga erkibiskups* would open up as the first saint in the Church year, beginning with Christmas.

**Table 3:** Contents of Holm perg 5 fol. (c. 1350–1365)

Folios	Texts	Historical period
1v–46v	Guðmundar saga biskups	1161–1237
46v–48r	Guðmundar drápa	
48r–58v	Jóns saga helga B	1052–1121
58v–59v	Biskupatal	
59v–60r	Postulatal	
60r–60v	Vígslupallar: Ordines	
60v–68v	Þorláks saga helga A	1133–1193
68v–71r	Játvarðar saga	1042–1170

Holm perg 5 fol. (table 3) is the second of the two medieval codices that comprise sagas of all three Icelandic saints (and Arngrímur Brandsson's *Guðmundar drápa* [poem about Guðmundr]). It also contains a list of the apostles (*Postulatal*), a list of Icelandic, Greenlandic and Norwegian bishops and abbots, *Vígslupallar*, which is a short treatise on the different ecclesiastical orders, and *Játvarðar saga*, the saga of Edward the Confessor (1042–1066) (for a detailed discussion of the codex, see Jón Helgason 1950). Again, the historical range of the codex reaches from the beginnings of Christianity to near contemporary times, and the geographical scope is both universal and local. This time, the order of the codex follows neither the biographical dates of the saints nor the liturgical calendar and appears rather arbitrary. Thus, in this codex, the three Icelandic saints are, on the one hand, again placed in context with both the apostles and a contemporary English saint, and, on the other hand, accompanied by chronological lists of local bishops and abbots, together with a treatise on the duties and rights of ecclesiastical officials. Thus, in this manuscript, the three Icelandic saints are commemorated simulta-

neously in a typological manner and in the context of local ecclesiastical history and organization.

**Table 4:** Contents of AM 657c 4to (c. 1340–1390)

Folios	Texts
1r–3r	Mikjáls saga
3v–9v	Maríu saga egypsku
10r–13r	Eiríks saga víðförla
13r–51v	Guðmundar saga helga

The arrangement of the fourth codex, AM 657c 4to (table 4), seems at first sight even more random. The original codex contained, as it is preserved today, a version of *Guðmundar saga helga* [saga of St Guðmundr], the saga of archangel Michael, *Maríu saga egypsku* [saga of Maria from Egypt] and *Eiríks saga víðförla* [saga of Eiríkr the traveller]. It thus spans local historiographic-hagiographic material in *Heilagra manna sögur* to the oscillating *Eiríks saga víðförla*, a *for-naldarsaga* [legendary saga] with a salvation-historical subtext that tells about a journey to paradise. The underlying concept of this codex thus again seems to be a typological one. The heterogeneity of the codex was even more distinct, when Árni Magnússon found the codex. The notes that he attached to this manuscript reveal that the codex also included, at that point, a copy of the *riddarasaga* [romance] *Vilhjálmss saga sjóðs* [saga of Vilhjálmr purse] in a hand dated to 1590–1610 (<https://handrit.is/is/manuscript/view/AM04-0657c>). One might assume that at some point in the seventeenth century somebody deemed it appropriate to gather the marvel stories about Christian saints, archangels and wondrous journeys to paradise together with the marvels and adventures of Vilhjálmr. If so, the conceptualisation of the texts – and the life of St Guðmundr – in the original codex would have remained ahistorical in the early modern age as well.

Yet another constellation appears in *Reykjarfjarðarbók* (AM 122 b fol.), dated to the last quarter of the fourteenth century. *Reykjarfjarðarbók* is the only codex containing both ecclesiastic and secular contemporary sagas, when thinking along the established subgenres of saga literature (critical as to this dichotomic distinction, see Úlfar Bragason 2005, 427). The codex contains *Sturlunga saga* – that in itself is a compilation of individual sagas in chronological order that deal with Icelandic history of the twelfth and thirteenth century – as well as fragments of *Árna saga biskups* [saga of bishop Árni] and *Guðmundar saga biskups*. Due to the fragmentary nature of all the texts, it is impossible to tell how the codex was originally organised. A chronological ordering of the material, following the

chronological organisation of *Sturlunga saga*, would have *Árna saga biskups* as the last element of the codex, as Árni was bishop of the southern diocese of Skálholt from 1269 to 1298. Irrespective of whether this was the actual organisation of the codex, the assemblage of texts reveals an interest in local contemporary history of both secular and ecclesiastical nature and thus a conceptualisation and remembrance of the life of Guðmundr that differs considerably from the other compilations studied in this chapter. In *Reykjarfjarðarbók* [book from Reykjarfjörður], both Guðmundr and Árni are remembered as agents in Icelandic history rather than as timeless, typological figures, an approach that reflects the active involvement of these two bishops in the political struggles of their time (Cormack 2005, 27). Neither Jón nor Þorlákr are ever conceptualized in this earthly, historical manner.

The placement of the sagas of the three Icelandic saints in most of the compilations reveals that the three bishops were predominantly remembered in an ahistorical, typological framework of an international scope. The material qualities of the book allow for the possibility of adding extra layers of meaning to a text by placing it in a specific textual environment. The other works that surround a text can reveal conceptualisations of that text and, as a consequence, also the organisation of the storehouse of memory at a given time.

## Works cited

### Primary sources

AM 122 b fol. (*Reykjarfjarðarbók*)  
 AM 219 fol.  
 AM 234 fol.  
 AM 645 4to  
 AM 657c 4to  
 Holm perg. 5 fol.

### Secondary sources

Ásdís Egilsdóttir. 2002. "Formáli." In *Biskupa sögur II*. Ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir. ÍF, 16. Reykjavík. vi–cli.  
 Assmann, Jan. 2010. "Communicative and Cultural Memory." In *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (in collaboration with Sara B. Young). Media and Cultural Memory/Medien und kulturelle Erinnerung, 8. Berlin and New York. 109–118.

- Cormack, Margaret. 2005. "Christian Biography." In *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*. Ed. Rory McTurk. Oxford. 27–42.
- Foote, Peter. 2003. "Formáli. Jóns saga Helga." In *Biskupa sögur*. Ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson and Peter Foote. Íf, 15. Reykjavík. ccxiii–cccxix.
- Jón Helgason. 1950. "Introduction." In *Byskupa sögur. MS. Perg. fol. no. 5 in the Royal Library of Stockholm*. Corpus Codicum Islandicorum Medii Aevi, 19. Copenhagen. 7–22.
- Hermann, Pernille. 2013. "Saga Literature, Cultural Memory and Storage." In *Memory and Remembering: Past Awareness in the Medieval North*. Ed. Pernille Hermann and Stephen A. Mitchell. Special issue of *Scandinavian Studies* 85.3: 332–354.
- Holtmark, Anne. 1938. "Introduction." In *A Book of Miracles. Ms. No. 645 4to of the Arna-Magnæam Collection in the University Library of Copenhagen*. Ed. Anne Holtmark. Corpus Codicum Islandicorum Medii Aevi, 12. 5–27.
- Kaalund, Kristian. 1889–1894. *Katalog over den Arnamagnæanske Håndskriftsamling*. 2 vols. Copenhagen.
- Jakobi-Mirwald, Christine. 2004. *Das mittelalterliche Buch. Funktion und Ausstattung*. Stuttgart.
- Rohrbach, Lena. 2010. "Pragmatik in Szene gesetzt. Mediale Dimensionen spätmittelalterlicher Handschriften des Jyske Lov." In *Opuscula XIII*. Ed. Britta Olrik Frederiksen and Jonna Louis-Jensen. Bibliotheca Arnamagnæna, 47. Copenhagen. 119–172.
- Skeat, T. C. 1994. "The Origin of the Christian Codex." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 102: 263–268.
- Úlfar Bragason. 2005. "Sagas of Contemporary History (Sturlunga saga)." In *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*. Ed. Rory McTurk. Oxford. 427–446.
- [www.handrit.is](http://www.handrit.is) (22 December 2016)
- [www.onp.ku.dk](http://www.onp.ku.dk) (22 December 2016)